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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT PUTIN, DEFMIN IVANOV ADDRESS RUSSIAN
MILITARY'S INTERNAL PROBLEMS

REF: MOSCOW 12457

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs Alice G. Wells.
Reasons 1.4 (B/D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Putin and Defense Minister Ivanov candidly acknowledged many of the military's internal problems during a 16 November senior commanders conference in Moscow. The two leaders promised various remedies ranging from higher salaries and better treatment for soldiers to steep increases for military hardware. Defense analysts praised the leadership's frank appraisal but remain skeptical whether the proposed changes will outlast the 2007-08 electoral cycle.
END SUMMARY.

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FRANK ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF SERIOUS PROBLEMS

¶2. (SBU) President Putin and Defense Minister Ivanov participated in an annual senior commanders review conference in Moscow 16 November. Military commanders, chiefs of military districts, admirals, and heads of the Defense Ministry's main departments listened as the President and DefMin candidly addressed many of the internal challenges facing the military.

¶3. (SBU) Ivanov acknowledged hazing and abuse of conscripts, poor housing and working conditions, and high suicide and accidental death rates among soldiers. He reported several positive trends; for example, incidents of hazing and accidental death have declined over the past year, while the army has increased its contacts with media, human rights, and other public organizations. On the negative side, corruption remains a serious issue, while low-quality training and poor logistics management continue to plague the military. Other issues that Ivanov addressed:

-- The military can anticipate a significant increase in budgetary outlays for armaments during the 2007-15 period. Ivanov commented that the military could expect to receive five trillion rubles for hardware (roughly USD 180 billion). To complement the increased spending, the Ministry of Defense will inaugurate a new purchasing system and establish a federal agency, led by civilians, to supervise acquisition and delivery.

-- Armed forces must be prepared to fight several conflicts simultaneously and be fully capable of operating globally, regionally, and locally.

-- Military districts will be reorganized into joint regional commands or, in some cases, eliminated.

-- Transformation from a conscript military to contract

personnel will continue.

-- There will be more civilian control to improve transparency, including support for a proposal by the Public Chamber to establish a Public Council under the MOD.

-- Construction battalions, notorious as the vehicle of choice for corrupt officers to misuse military personnel, will be disbanded by the end of 2006. MOD has already dismissed three general officers for misuse of soldiers and has launched investigations against three others.

-- Quality of training will improve and incorporate greater use of computers and other information technology.

-- There will be greater transparency in keeping parents informed of the welfare and whereabouts of their children in the military. MOD will encourage military personnel to report instances of abuse -- "no more punishment for whistle-blowers."

14. (SBU) Putin focused on greater investment in military hardware, strengthening strategic forces, developing new strategic weapons, and promising steep pay raises to military personnel (50 percent by the end of 2008). The Commander-in-Chief emphasized that Russia's armed forces would soon emerge from their "bare survival phase" and be fully capable of confronting any type of threat through a combination of weapons modernization and revamping of the personnel system.

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BUT WILL REFORM TAKE HOLD?

MOSCOW 00012595 002 OF 002

15. (C) Defense analysts told us that the goal of Putin and Ivanov was to motivate senior commanders during a difficult transition period. Boris Makarenko, Deputy Director of the Center for Political Technologies, and Pavel Felgengauer, an independent analyst, were impressed with the frank acknowledgement of internal problems in the military but were less sure that the proposed solutions, especially those that promised to improve conditions for rank-and-file soldiers, would survive the 2007-08 electoral cycle.

16. (C) Felgengauer, in particular, was more pessimistic. He agreed that the Russian military was badly in need of weapons modernization. However, the greatest challenge that the military establishment faced in implementing the solutions proposed by Putin and Ivanov was bureaucratic inertia. He welcomed the analysis of the military's internal problems and appreciated that the media had been permitted to publicize them, but more than rhetoric was needed to push the changes through a resistant senior officer corps. Felgengauer emphasized that, rather than a handful of prosecutions to reduce corruption and misuse of soldiers, perpetrators of hazing incidents needed to be convicted and sentenced to harsher prison terms. Otherwise, the message would not filter down through the ranks.

17. (SBU) A more poignant reminder of public perceptions of the military came from an ordinary Russian citizen. Sitting next to a poloff at dinner, the middle-aged woman commented that conditions for today's soldiers had declined significantly. She noted sadly that "even in Moscow we see how poorly their uniforms fit, and we can see how hungry they look. This was not the case during Soviet times."

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